

**PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES OF AUGUST 8, 2005**

**2005-0509 - Chung Tai Zen Center Of Sunnyvale** [Applicant] **Chung Tai Intl Chan Buddhist Assn** [Owner]: Application for a Use Permit on a 1.5-acre site to allow the relocation of a community cultural place of assembly from 1031 N Fair Oaks Ave to the following site address. The property is located at **750 East Arques Avenue** (near N Wolfe Rd) in an M-S (Industrial & Service) Zoning District. (Negative Declaration) (APN: 205-32-007) JM

**Jamie McLeod**, Associate Planner, presented the staff report. There are four primary issues related to the site. The first is the request for a Community Center use in an industrial zoned area. Staff recommends limiting this use to a three-year period and requiring a review at that time similar to a review required for the neighboring Community Center. The second issue is the applicant's request for residential use on the property for the Center's officiates. This request was not reviewed in the initial study and the applicant is willing to withdraw the residential request if it would result in denial of the application. The third issue is parking which is staff's greatest concern. As proposed, the project does not meet the City parking requirements. Staff is recommending a modified calculation for the parking, based on the proposed use rather than the floor area, as the users of the site will not be using all the rooms at the same time. Based on the proposed use calculation, the existing 91 parking spaces would exceed the parking requirements except once a month on Sundays and one annual event. These 13 annual events may be specifically conditioned through a Transportation and Parking Management Plan (TPMP) which could require carpooling or parking at a neighboring site. Staff has included a recommended Condition of Approval (COA) to insure that any potential future uses on the site are limited to this type of proposed use. The fourth issue is the landscaping which is slightly non-conforming. Adding landscaping would reduce parking so staff is not recommending any additional landscape requirements. Staff has a few modifications based on questions and information from the Commission and the applicant. Ms. McLeod provided an amended site map that was received after the report was completed showing additional parking as the result of removing landscaping. Staff is not recommending this, but wanted to provide the information. Another modification is that the report has several references to "on-site residences". Staff is recommending the project be non-residential, so the report should read "staff on-site." Staff is recommending the addition of COA 1.Y. that states residential use is not allowed. Based on a question about maintaining the perimeter trees, staff is recommending modifying COA 6.B. or F. that touch on the trees, but do not specifically state "maintaining perimeter trees." The applicant wants to increase the number of fixed seats in the Zen hall from 89 to 97. This change does not affect parking so staff is recommending approval of this modification. The applicant has requested that COA 1.K.1. regarding the attendance limit for the 12 monthly services a year be slightly increased to account for additional staff. Staff is recommending that this COA be modified by

increasing the attendance limit. A Commissioner previously asked what the course of action would be if the residential use were considered for the site. Ms. McLeod said if the residential use were approved that the Commission would need to direct staff to redo the environmental review. The Commission also asked about coordinating traffic with the neighboring uses on the major holidays. Ms. McLeod said that the neighboring centers and sites have different days of celebrations or events that do not conflict. Staff recommends approval of this project with conditions, limiting the use of the building, limiting the number of attendees, to not allow residential uses, and to only approve the use for three years requiring a new use permit at that time.

**Comm. Sulser** asked staff regarding COA 1.K.1., what the suggested allowable number of attendees on the site would be. Ms. McLeod said she thinks the applicant would like the number to be increased to 110.

**Comm. Klein** asked staff what the guidelines are for a caretaker. Trudi Ryan, Planning Officer, said a use permit would be required if there were a caretaker proposed to live on the site.

**Chair Hungerford** questioned staff about the TDM plan and if it had this been tried in other situations to deal with parking. Ms. Ryan said we are asking for a Transportation and Parking Management Plan. She said the neighboring Cultural Center has a TDM plan that appears to be successful. This plan would possibly include offsite parking elsewhere through agreements, using public transportation and carpooling.

**Comm. Simons** asked staff for clarification on COA 1.K.1. and if the applicant was asking for a total of 120 people. Ms. McLeod said yes, as staff understands it.

**Chair Hungerford opened the public hearing.**

**The Venerable Jian Hu Shifu**, applicant, introduced the proposal for the Zen Center. He said that they are one of five Buddhist monasteries in the United States. Five years ago they opened a monastery in the East Bay in Lafayette, California and finding that many of their members came from the South Bay area, decided to set up an additional Zen Center in the South Bay. Their primary purpose is to teach Zen meditation and the principles of Buddhism to help individuals to have calm minds and inner peace. They are relocating from their Fair Oaks Avenue site, in Sunnyvale, as the current site is to be redeveloped into a residential area. They have also found the need for more space. He explained the benefits of meditation and how it can be beneficial to anyone in helping them become more peaceful and capable of dealing with problems. This Center will benefit a broad cross-section of the community. The programs at the Zen Center consist of weekly two-hour classes with one hour focusing on meditation and one hour focusing on Buddhism instruction. They would like to have a bigger hall, but

will not have a lot of people in the classes. The spaciousness is more calming. They also provide workshops on overcoming stress and anger. Their Sunday services generally have about 12 people in attendance and once a month the Sunday services have 60 to 100 in attendance. Once a year there is a Buddha birthday celebration with approximately 150 in attendance. This celebration falls in May. There is one family program on Saturday evenings that is for parents and youth to help facilitate communication. He commented that he has a PhD in Computer Science and worked in the high-tech industry before he decided to become a monk. He understands the hectic lifestyle and knows that the Zen Center can be a benefit to many people. He mentioned the many benefits of meditation and quoted several scientific journals. He commented about how this proposed site is located in an area that is transitioning towards residential. He does not feel that their presence will negatively impact industries from moving in. He said they have proven to be good neighbors at the existing site. They have also visited their neighbors at the proposed site and the neighbors are fine with their moving in. He said, regarding the residential request, that traditionally monks live onsite, but that it is more important that they have this place to provide their services for the community than it is for them to live onsite. They are a multi-cultural facility, work with interfaith groups and promote to members to consider the value of community service. They have done fundraising for tsunami relief, environmental causes and community services. He said that he feels the parking will usually be underutilized as in meditation a crowded room makes it less effective. He said they have agreed to have fixed seats to limit use numbers. He said on the few days that the parking will be fully used that they will implement alternate plans. They have also identified other alternatives including large public parking within walking distance or shuttle distance. They are happy to do other improvements that are required in the COAs and other requirements from VTA (Valley Transportation Authority). They operate on a donation basis so members can easily attend. He commented that this project supports the policy of requiring appropriate buffers in transitioning areas within dissimilar neighborhoods and land use. The Zen Center facilitates the City's goal of providing multi-cultural environments. He shared a story about when he was in school in regards to teachers, technology, proper use of technology and the importance of peace within ourselves. He said the Zen Center provides a unique service to the community and helps to make people's lives better. He said he is grateful for the Commission's consideration and requested they grant the permit.

**Dana Eaton**, a Sunnyvale resident, spoke in support the Zen Center. She shared her interests, affiliations and involvement with travel, art, China and volunteering. She read about the Zen Center in the Sunnyvale Sun in June of 2004 and contacted them to see if Shifu would come to speak at one of their organization meetings. He did and based on that visit she and a friend began attending a classes. She said that the Zen Center attracts a culturally and educationally diverse community and is of great value to this community.

**John Houston**, a Sunnyvale resident, and retired professional “worrier” spoke in support of the Zen Center. He said he was familiar with Zen, but never had a chance to learn more about it. He signed up for classes. He said that meditation has helped him deal with worrying in his life, relating a personal medical incident that he normally would have not dealt with well. He said the Zen training helped him stay calm a better get through the episode. He said the world needs more of the calming influence that the Zen Center can provide.

**Frank Chong**, President of Mission College, spoke in support of the Zen Center. He attended the Zen Center and has since formed a partnership with Mission College. He said that they have staff and students that attend the Zen Center and monks that attend classes at Mission College. He commented on the value of the Center to him personally and that he has been taking the meditation and Buddhism classes. He said it has been very transformative to him and commented that the diversity of the Center’s members is very broad.

**Dr. Wendy Abraham**, Associate Director of the Stanford Center for Buddhist Studies, Asian Religions and Cultures initiative, and author of *Chinese for Dummies*, spoke in support of the Zen Center, though she neither Chinese nor Buddhist. She said since the Zen Center opened in 2004 it has made important connections with key Bay Area academic institutions and other organizations. Stanford University has benefited from it in broadening contacts. This fall Stanford will have the privilege of having the Dali Lama speaking on campus. Last year Master Jian Hu, of the Zen Center spoke at our inaugural lecture. His talk brought in over 300 people, which is unheard of. His presentation was extremely well received and they want to have more programs. She commented about people from the Stanford area coming down to the Zen Center and that Stanford would provide a shuttle. She said the Zen Center is fantastic and encouraged the Commission to approve this project.

**Comm. Simons** asked Dr. Abraham to further explain the idea of a shuttle from Stanford. She said that Stanford would like to have the Venerable Jian Hu come once a month to Stanford and speak to the community. In return they would like to take a group of interested people to the Zen Center once a month for classes. This shuttle would help with parking issues.

**Chu Lee**, a Sunnyvale resident, retiree, and receptionist at the Zen Center, spoke in support of the Zen Center. She said she represents many of the older Chinese immigrants who came to America in pursuit freedom and prosperity. She came across the Zen Center in March of 2004 and it helps her with calmness, serenity, soul searching and to learn the truths about the authentic self. She said it is a place she can go to for peace and harmony. She encouraged the Commission to approve this long-awaited new Zen Center.

**Parivash Khanjani**, a Sunnyvale resident, and doctor and immigrant from Iran, said she and her family moved here to improve the quality of their lives and to leave their stressful life in Iran. She said she began attending the Center about a year ago and that it has helped her and her family. She has seen the changes in her life and her family members and she is calmer, happier and more patient. She feels they are on the right track to a better life. Her children are all in universities right now and the lessons taught at the Center have helped them to be more focused on their studies. She encouraged the Commission to support this project so families like hers can continue to receive these valuable services.

**Ruben Millan**, a fire fighter for the City of San Jose, spoke in support of the Zen Center. He said that his job is very stressful and the meditation classes at the Zen Center have been very helpful in reducing stress levels. He said that he has been very impressed with the openness and diversity of the people who attend the Center and would like to see more people become interested in what the Center has to offer.

**Hailen Mak**, an Allergy Physician in San Jose and part of the faculty at Stanford in the Department of Allergy and Immunology, spoke in support of the Zen Center. She said that she has attended the classes at the Center and has been very impressed in the teaching of Jian Hu with his scientific background and his ability to speak both Chinese and English. She shared how the teachings have helped her through a crisis at work. She said the training she has received has made her a better doctor, more mindful, patient and helps her have inner peace.

**Dean Linebarger**, a resident of Santa Clara Valley, spoke in support of the Zen Center. He is a County government employee and his job defines stress. He said the Zen Center meditation training has helped him cope through recent personally difficult times. He said the Zen practice has helped him have a better perspective, a new morality, to be more patient, more aware, and to confront himself daily. It has opened him up to possibilities and options.

**Harriet Rowe**, a Sunnyvale resident, said that the issue of this project is not the values of the Zen Center, but that this is an industrial area possibly being turned into another use. She has no problem with the Zen Center being in Sunnyvale. She acknowledged that this is a transitional area. She encouraged the Planning Commission to not allow residential in this building since it is an industrial zone.

**Harold Barclay**, President of the business next to the current Zen Center location on Fair Oaks Avenue, spoke in support of the Zen Center expressing that they have been excellent neighbors. He said he has never had a problem with parking and that their services are quiet. He acknowledged that this area is ITR and his building has been sold to become residential. He feels the Zen Center will be a benefit to the City.

**Wendy Lee-Yu**, a licensed Psychiatric Social Worker, spoke in support of the Zen Center. She and her son who has autism first attended the Zen Center in Lafayette four years ago to help relieve personal stress and face struggles. It has helped her and her son and he will be attending college this fall. She works at the Center as a receptionist and has been impressed with the openness of members who attend that have been resistant to other forms of mental health treatments.

**Luna DeCurtis**, a Sunnyvale resident and Speech Pathologist, spoke in support of the Zen Center. She said that she believes that there are people who fear or do not understand what Buddhism is. She expressed the benefits it has been in her life and recommends the Center to families in the area. She asked the audience, by a show of hands, how many people are in support of the Zen Center project. The majority of the full audience raised their hands. She hopes the Commission will approve it as it will be a positive addition to our community.

**Al Chan**, a Sunnyvale resident, spoke in support of the Zen Center. He said that meditation and Buddhism has helped his wife and him and he would like to see the Zen Center continue in Sunnyvale as it helps make his life more peaceful.

**Hau-Ching**, the architect, confirmed that a total of 120 people in on-site attendance would be very adequate for the project.

**Chair Hungerford closed the public hearing.**

**Comm. Sulser moved Alternative 1, to adopt the Negative Declaration and approve the Use Permit with attached conditions (including limiting use of the building and the number of attendees, and not allowing the residential uses). Comm. Klein seconded.**

**Comm. Sulser** said that the places of assembly issues are often a dilemma for the Commission. As Harriet Rowe mentioned, to convert an industrial area to a non-industrial use has to be carefully considered. He said that after visiting the site, there are already multiple uses and he feels this conversion will have very little impact on the existing community. This is an exciting project and he looks forward to it.

**Comm. Klein** said this will be a good project for the community. He was concerned with the parking, but there seems to be good solutions offered to address it. He said he thinks this will be a big help to the community and he looks forward to seeing the Center at this new location.

**Comm. Simons** asked staff if the modifications mentioned in Ms. McLeod's presentation of the staff report were intended to be included in the motion. Ms. Ryan said if the intent was to include all of the items Ms. McLeod mentioned during the staff report presentation, then those do not have to be enumerated as

they are on the record. Comm. Sulser confirmed that his intent was to incorporate all of the items.

**Comm. Babcock** confirmed that there would be no residential uses allowed. It is always difficult making an exception converting an Industrial area to another use, but this area has very little industry left in it. She will be supporting the motion.

**Comm. Fussell** said he will be supporting this motion. He said that this use is actually more compatible than industrial use as the area is changing. He is not in favor of the residential use and is glad to see that the project includes a TPMP. He said he thinks it is good that we will have the opportunity to look at the project in three years.

**Comm. Simons** said he will be supporting the motion, and that it is important that we have the three-year time limit. He feels this decision is fair-minded and consistent with our past actions.

**Chair Hungerford** said he will be supporting the motion.

**Final Action:**

**Comm. Sulser made a motion on Item 2005-0509 for Alternative 1, to adopt the Negative Declaration and approve the Use Permit with attached conditions (including limiting use of the building and the number of attendees, and not allowing the residential uses). Comm. Klein seconded. Motion carried unanimously, 6-0, Comm. Moylan absent.**

**Motion carried unanimously, 6-0, Comm. Moylan absent.**

**This item is appealable to the City Council no later than August 23, 2005.**